

Inner-city programs would aid USA

Why soccer?

That's the question the foreign press constantly asked me. They wanted to know, "Why didn't you choose basketball or football?"

It was the same for Jimmy Banks.

We are the only blacks on the U.S. World Cup team, and because blacks dominate basketball and football, those were obvious questions.

The answer is obvious also.

We were exposed to soccer at an early age when it had higher visibility. I'm speaking of the '70s, when the North American Soccer League was vibrant.

It was by chance that I got involved when I did. My family moved to suburban Maryland from Washington, D.C., when I was 10. If we hadn't moved, I wouldn't have known about



Desmond Armstrong is a defender on the U.S. World Cup team.

soccer until it was too late.

Jimmy's experience was different. A Salvation Army coach organized a team in his neighborhood in Milwaukee.

Otherwise, Jimmy would not have been exposed to soccer until later — or maybe not at all.

U.S. Soccer Federation President Werner Fricker recently said there is a need to develop programs for inner-city youths. But those are meaningless words if they're not acted out.

The federation hasn't done

anything to recruit black athletes. There have been many talented black soccer players who have played with state teams. But something kept them from making the national team, and they dropped out.

More than once, I felt I should have made the national team, but I didn't make it until my first year in the Major Indoor Soccer League. Jimmy was in his last year of college when he made it.

More often than not, black players are moved to different positions with the national team.

For instance, I played forward and midfield throughout my career, but when I got to the national team, I was converted to defender. Another example: Todd Haskins of the under-16 national team. He's listed as an offensive midfield-

er but plays sweeper and stopper for the national team.

How do we get more blacks playing soccer?

There's no simple answer.

Many have played as youths, but few continue because soccer doesn't present any financial rewards. There's no pot of gold to inspire kids and encourage them to become better players.

To get more blacks interested in soccer, we need to promote the sport. If kids saw soccer on TV and read about in the newspaper, they'd see another avenue out.

The public school systems are one means of getting more exposure.

Introduce soccer as a physical education class, and organize teams outside of school hours and create a league.

Some people are promoting soccer in black communities.

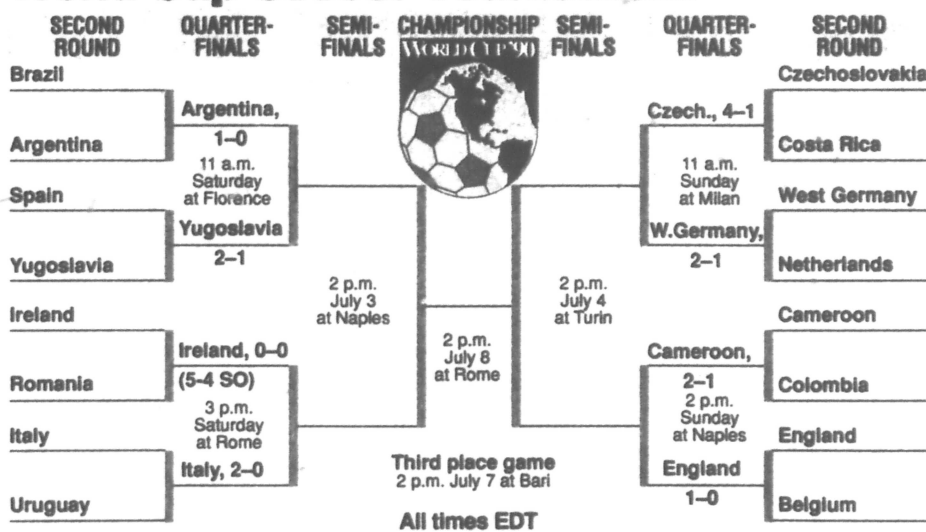
A group in Boston that includes a sportswriter who is a former player has started a program. It's small, but it's a start.

Jimmy and I are trying to get our hometowns (Milwaukee and Baltimore-D.C.) to help us start youth programs.

Having more blacks playing won't necessarily make the USA a soccer power. Historically, soccer is a poor man's sport. Maradona and Pele come from poverty-stricken backgrounds. That spurred them on.

In the USA, soccer is a suburban sport. When we tap into all segments of this country, then you'll find a player with hunger and more desire. That will make for a more aggressive, attractive and competitive brand of soccer.

World Cup Soccer Tournament



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Rested Nicklaus